

Good Friday 2006 - MCCF service

“In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” How do we understand the Cross today?

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2 Corinthians 5:16-21

The Problem of Suffering.

When we look at the world today there is so much suffering of innocent people.

We see the innocent people killed in terrorist attacks. We see innocent Iraqi children killed by American bombs.

We see the people of Dafur in Sudan being hunted down and driven out of their own villages and often forced to watch while their friends and relatives are tortured and killed.

And for many of you sitting here today, suffering in your homeland of Chin State is very real and very recent. You may have suffered yourself, you may have been driven out by fear of being attacked or imprisoned, many of you have seen your friends and relatives persecuted by the Burmese soldiers.

When we face the problem of suffering in this world there are often two different responses.

For the comfortable Western onlookers, the question they often ask is, “Why does God let this happen?” It is a fair question and but it often leads to the conclusion that God doesn’t really care or can’t possibly exist as a good God – because how could God let this happen?

But for those who **are** suffering, those who are **in the middle** of pain inflicted by others for no real reason, for those of you who are hurting because you have lost loved ones, been torn from your homeland, and suffered imprisonment and bad treatment – the question you are asking is not “Why does God let this happen?” The question of the suffering is “My God, **where are you?**”

“Where is God?” Is he far away from us, and absent God in his own heaven? Or is he a sufferer among the sufferers? Does he share in our suffering? Do our sufferings cut him to the heart too?

You see, for those who are looking at suffering from the outside their question is about an apathetic God – a God who doesn’t care.

But for those who are actually suffering, their question is a crying out, a looking for a God who suffers with us.

These questions take us to the very heart of the Christian faith – the message of the Crucified Christ. What was really going on when Jesus the Christ died on the cross?

And more to the point, Where was God when Jesus died?

The theology of the Cross.

Christ died on the cross with the cry, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Many have tried to offer an answer to this question in the history of the church. But is there any real answer? Aren’t some Christians a bit like Job’s friends, who want to explain his suffering to him, when he is simply not willing to be consoled?

When we face honestly the reality of Christ’s cross and his experience of God-forsakenness we are faced with even more questions but they are very important questions.

1. Why did God abandon Christ on the Cross?

The simplest answer can be found in Paul and in John. God gave up Christ for us – he did it out of love for us.

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom 8:32)

But we also read that Christ gave of himself – *“the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me..” (Gal 2:20)*

So from this are we to conclude that God sacrificed his own Son and let him die in the pain of the cross alone?

Is this a God who does not care and cruelly abandons his own son?

NO, because as Paul goes on to say, *“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19)*

If God the Father was in Christ, the Son, **this means that Christ’s sufferings are God’s sufferings too**, and then God too experiences death on the cross.

Christ suffers the pains of dying, God suffers the death of the Son. So Christ’s passion lays hold of God himself too, and becomes God’s passion.

This is a mystery but it is absolutely central to our understanding of the cross.

What it is saying then, is that God goes with us, God suffers with us. So where Christ, God’s son goes, the Father goes too. In the self-giving of the Son we see too the self-giving of God.

So you see that to the question of “why is their suffering?” there may be many answers, But more important is the question of where? Where is God in suffering? and the answer to that is Christ himself.

2. Why did God take this suffering of Christ on himself?

I think the Bible gives two main answers to this question..

2.1. So that God could be beside us in our suffering and with us in our pain.

The story of the passion of Christ is the story of the self-emptying of Christ. Jesus is abandoned by his friends, he loses his identity as a Jew when he is handed over to the Romans, and Pilate has him killed as an enemy of the human race.

Phillipians 2: 7-8 sums up this humiliating story..

but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, ... 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

If God takes this road with Christ, if God himself was *in Christ*, then this story of Christ’s humiliation brings God’s companionship to people who are as humiliated and as robbed of their identity as he was.

The cross of Christ therefore stands as a reminder that his sufferings are God’s sufferings and that this means that our sufferings are taken into God as well.

Therefore Christ’s brothers and sisters are the unnumbered and unnamed, the tortured and forsaken people, the people torn from their families and their homeland. Christ entered into

this humiliation and this forsakenness so that he could become a brother of the humiliated and forsaken and bring them God's kingdom.

So the Cross is a reminder that God enters into our pain and suffering – he walks with us through it and we are never cut off from his love (Romans 8:28). He feels our pain and is on the side of the victims and the sufferers.

The Second answer that is given to the question of why God took into himself the suffering of Christ is found in the idea of atonement.

2.2 So that God could offer atonement for the sins of the world.

From early on, the community of Christians saw cross as God's way of bringing forgiveness for the sins of the world.

Is it not true however that only the person wronged can offer forgiveness to the wrongdoer.

If a Burmese soldier has attacked and killed your friend – in many ways it is only your friend, the victim, who can truly offer forgiveness and atonement but they can't undo wrong. Can the murderer be forgiven? Do they need to be? I think so because to hurt and destroy the lives of other people is to lose something yourself and become less human..

In many religions, atonement is gained through the sacrifice of animals, sacrifices that are supposed to appease the anger of the gods which has been roused by the wrong-doing of the people. But in Israel it was different.

There was a sacrifice too – but it was called the "scapegoat". The scapegoat was given by God so that the sins of the people could be transferred to it through the laying on of hands, and so that the goat could carry these sins out into the desert, away from the people.

But the scapegoat is not offered to God in order to appease his anger. God gives the scapegoat in order to reconcile the people. According to the prophet Isaiah's vision, God will send a new "Servant of God" who will take away the sins of the people. In the Bible it is always God himself who 'carries' the people's sins, and in this way brings about reconciliation.

In this way God takes into himself our own guilt as well as our suffering. Our guilt becomes God's suffering and therefore we can be freed to be reconciled with God and with each other.

We also sometimes we speak of Christ as our redeemer. This word comes from the idea of owing and debts. When you owe someone something, and then pay it off, we say you have "redeemed" the amount you owe. Long ago, many people had to work for others to pay off their debts, or because they were slaves. Sometimes, another person would pay off the debt, or give the owners some money, so that the person could go free. When they did this, they "redeemed" the person.

Some people understand what Christ did as kind of being like this.. We can be freed from the loneliness of suffering and be freed too from guilt of our own sin and complacency. WE can also know that we don't have to be slaves to anyone else, or to any other ideas like being popular, having lots of money, or always trying to please others. We do not need to be afraid of anything, or feel like we don't matter, because Christ has shown us that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

3. What happens when we take the truth of the cross to heart?

3.1 We can know and feel the closeness of God in our own pain.

The God who has become human has made our lives part of his life, and our sufferings his suffering. That is why when we feel pain we participate in his pain, and when we grieve we share his grief.

People who believe in the God who suffers with us, recognize their suffering in God, and God in their suffering. In companionship with him, they can find the strength to remain in love and not to become bitter, in spite of pain and sorrow.

Life and hope can be born anew when we are able to feel the closeness of God who is the source of life and forgiveness and who takes the suffering of the world and bears it in himself..

3.2 Those who hear the message of the crucified Jesus hear the call to discipleship as well.

Discipleship is simply being caught up body and soul in the life giving way of Christ..

What is the way of Christ?

According to the Gospels it is being caught up in the mission of the Messiah - "Go and preach: the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying, give without pay (Matt 10:7).

Proclaiming God's kingdom to the poor means giving back to them the divine dignity of which the violent have robbed them.

Healing the sick means planting the seeds of life in this world of death.

Cleansing lepers means accepting the disabled and marginalized who pushed out of our society.

Casting out demons means shaking the idols of materialism and consumerism that so dominate life in the West and in Australia – to which so many of the weak have been sacrificed.

So following the crucified Christ means getting involved in the struggle of life against death, and yes, against the people who spread death. And it means engaging in this struggle in our own place and our own time.

For me, this means engaging in the struggle against the inhuman treatment of your people in Burma that forces them to become refugees. But it also means calling on the Australian government to treat asylum seekers with justice and respect.

Conclusion

So to conclude, the Cross of Christ is the powerful message that God has entered into our sufferings.

And the resurrection of Christ is the truth that through this participation and companionship in suffering there is a door to hope.

This hope is not just wishful thinking but a call to participate with God in the ongoing struggle of life against death and to know that through the Cross and in the future of God this struggle will prevail.

God bless us as we work together for peace.
Amen.